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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: Turkmenistan: Zatoka Requests International Community Not to Intervene in His Case

Summary

11. (SBU) International human rights groups monitoring Turkmenistan reported on December 19 about the detention of ecologist and civil society activist Andrey Zatoka in Dashoguz, northern Turkmenistan, on December 17. Post has learned that Zatoka's detention allegedly was related to smuggling reptiles, but that Zatoka requested that the international community not draw any additional attention to his case. Zatoka still had not been released by December 29; a friend was told that his detention was for 15, rather than 5 days. The Vienna-based Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR), led by dissident Farid Tuhbatullin, reported that the reasons for Zatoka's detention remained unclear, but the circumstances clearly suggested that it was "an act of intimidation motivated by his civil society engagement." According to the report, Zatoka was detained the same day he was supposed to leave for Ashgabat, from where he was due to travel to Moscow to attend a meeting as an advisor to the International Social and Ecological Union. End Summary.

International Community Problematic

12. (SBU) According to a community facilitator for Counterpart International in Dashoguz (please protect), whom Zatoka contacted following his detention, Zatoka has asked that the international community not intervene with the Government of Turkmenistan on his behalf. Any efforts on the part of the embassy would only bring unwelcome attention to his work and travels, and could prove problematic in the long-run. According to Zatoka's message, his detention was related to the unlicensed transport of reptiles. After completing five-day community service penalty for "violating" civic order, Zatoka had said that he expected to be released on December 23. However, he was still in detention on December 29.

Zatoka-Embassy Engagement

13. (SBU) Zatoka is the co-chair of the Dashoguz Ecological Club, a USAID Counterpart Consortium program facilitator, and was a FY-2005 International Visitors Leadership Program (IVLP): Non-Governmental Organizations, Social Issues and Civil Society participant. Zatoka most recently met with USAID's Religion State and Society Specialist David Hunsicker in Dashoguz on December 14. Previously, embassy issued a FY 2003 Democracy Commission grant (\$6,730) to the Dashoguz Ecological Club to open a video studio in order to produce short movies, open two video rental stations and conduct weekly film shows in the EcoClub's Dashoguz office and throughout Dashoguz Welayat. Only the grant equipment was purchased by the time the NGO was

closed by a court order in late October 2003. (Note: The NGO was closed when a court determined that the club's charter did not meet the requirements of the new law on public associations, which was officially issued in early November 2003. End Note.)

¶4. (SBU) Zatoka worked with Farid Tuhbatullin in the Dashoguz Ecological Club, before Tuhbatullin's arrest following the assassination attempt on late President Niyazov in November 2002. Farid Tuhbatullin was amnestied in the spring of 2003, following the OSCE Chairman in Office's meeting with President Niyazov, Tuhbatullin emigrated to Austria and started the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR), an NGO that monitors human rights issues in Turkmenistan. TIHR has been known for its extensive reporting from Dashoguz Province, the region where Zatoka resides. An August 22, 2005 press release by TIHR reported specific details about post's human rights conference sponsored jointly with the Government of Turkmenistan in Ashgabat on August 18-19, 2005. An embassy FSN observed Zatoka recording presentations at the conference on an audio tape, which is not a common practice in Turkmenistan.

Comment

¶5. (SBU) Post will continue to monitor Zatoka's case and will report whether or not he is released at the beginning of the New Year. In addition to Zatoka's possible concern that international attention might be counter-productive, it also could be possible that he is guilty. End Comment.

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